



STUDENT CELLPHONE POLICY GUIDELINES

Background (Research)

Recent research and statistics on teen and adolescent cell phone usage reveal significant insights into how young people use their devices, the extent of their use, and the potential implications for their mental health, social behavior, and academic performance. A 2022 report from the Pew Research Center found that 95% of U.S. teens aged 13–17 have smartphone access, a significant increase from 73% in 2015¹. According to the same Pew Research Center report, 46% of teens report being online almost constantly, a marked increase from 24% in 2014–2015. The Common Sense Media 2021 report on teens' media use found that teens aged 13–18 spend an average of 4.8 hours per day² on social media³.

Impact on Mental Health

Multiple studies have found a link between high levels of smartphone use and increased rates of depression and anxiety among adolescents. SleepFoundation.org reported in 2021 that 72% of teens bring their phones to bed, which can lead to disrupted sleep patterns and lower sleep quality. In May 2023, the Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, highlighted research studies showing correlations between social media use and poor sleeping habits being associated with a range of negative outcomes, including decreased academic performance, increased risk of depression, and reduced overall well-being⁴.

Academic Performance

A study published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* in 2020 found that students who frequently use their phones during class perform worse academically⁵. The study highlighted that phone use during lectures can reduce information retention and lower overall grades. According to the 2023 report *Constant Companion* by Common Sense Media, 97% of participants used their phones during the school day, for a median of 43 minutes, with very few stating they received no notifications during school days and nights⁶. Data from the CDC indicates that over 57% of middle school students and 72% of high school students reported sleeping less than the recommended amount for their ages⁷. The problem is significant enough for 23.8% of adolescents to be suffering from insomnia, a severe sleep disorder that involves noticeable cognitive impairment and mental function, including decreased attention, impaired memory, slow processing, worsened sequential thinking, and reduced creativity⁸.

Call to Action

To create a safe, focused, and equitable learning environment, we must develop uniform and consistent cell phone policies in our school districts that are tailored to be age-appropriate and address the unique needs of our students. Let's work together—educators, parents, and administrators—to establish clear guidelines that balance the benefits of technology with the importance of minimizing distractions and promoting healthy social interactions. We can support our students' academic success and overall well-being by implementing thoughtful, research-based policies. Join us in taking this important step toward enhancing the educational experience for all students.

Guidelines to Consider When Developing Cell Phone Use Policy

1. Encourage local boards of education to adopt and update a policy limiting the use of cellular phones and other electronic communication devices every 5 years while the pupils are under the supervision and control of an employee or employees of that school district, county office of education, or charter school.
 - a. Involve significant stakeholder participation in the development of the policy.
 - b. Consider securing a funding source to support cellphone locking devices or other means of securing devices collected during the school day.
 - c. Prohibit monitoring or collecting information related to a pupil's online activities.
 - d. Determine the policy for collecting and redistributing cell phones during the school day.
 - i. Will cell phones and smart devices need to be collected? How will they be redistributed?
 - ii. Should students turn off their phones and put them in their backpacks or lockers?
2. Include enforcement mechanisms that limit access to smartphones and other smart devices with exceptions for emergencies, permissions granted by school staff for educational purposes, health-related reasons, and in support of individualized education programs (e.g., IEPs or 504 accommodations).
 - a. Define parameters for emergencies, including how to contact a student while in school, and communicate this to students and families.



- b. Teach safe cell phone and smart device usage during emergencies.
- c. Define and teach staff, students, and families the appropriate use of cell phones and devices for instructional purposes.
- d. Provide equitable access to technology and consider using school-owned laptops instead of personal devices to ensure all students can participate.
- e. Provide behavior expectations for cell phones and devices to staff, students, and families.
- f. Define use and non-use areas within the school and classroom.
- g. Include a graduated set of consequences for violating the cell phone policy, ranging from a warning to confiscating the phone for the day and potentially more serious consequences for repeated violations.

3. Determine age-appropriate guidelines.

- a. Consider a policy that exists for all students but includes more flexible rules for middle and high school students. For example, cell phones are prohibited all day for elementary students, but middle and high school students can use their phones before and after school, between class periods, during lunch, and during free periods.
- b. Guidelines should reflect a gradual increase in responsibility as students progress through school levels. Younger students benefit from more structured rules, while older students can be given more autonomy as they demonstrate responsible behavior.

4. Support education and outreach.

- a. Educate staff, students, and families by providing information on the mental and physical health effects of high cell phone and social media use.
- b. Teach your students digital literacy, media literacy, and digital citizenship, and provide resources for families on these topics.

Resources

- [Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022](#)
- [The Common Sense Census 2021: Media Use by Tweens and Teens](#)
- [Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use](#)
- [Teens Spend Average of 4.8 Hours on Social Media Per Day](#)
- [Improve Your Child's School Performance With a Good Night's Sleep](#)
- [Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory](#)
- [The Impact of Mobile Phone Usage on Student Learning](#)
- [Short Sleep Duration Among Middle School and High School Students — United States, 2015](#)

Endnotes

¹From *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022*. Atske, S., & Atske, S. Pew Research Center. (2024, April 17).

²From *Teens Spend Average of 4.8 Hours on Social Media Per Day*. Gallup. (2023, October 13).

³Social media includes YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp. When asked which site they wouldn't want to live without, 32% of teens selected YouTube, according to *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*. Common Sense Media. (2022).

⁴Adapted from *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023).

⁵Adapted from *Fewer students are benefiting from doing their homework: an eleven-year study*. Glass, A. L., & Kang, M. (2020). *Educational Psychology*, 42(2), 185–199.

⁶From *Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use*. Common Sense Media. (2023).

⁷From *Sleep in middle and high school students*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2020, September 10).

⁸Adapted from *Sleep patterns and insomnia among adolescents: a population-based study*. Hysing, M., Pallesen, S., Stormark, K.M., Lundervold, A.J. & Sivertsen, B. (2013), *J Sleep Res*, 22: 549-556.